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STAT

A Long-Running Chemical-Biological Guernica

By EUGENE CARLSON

For several years, reports from Southeast Asia have alleged that poison gas manufactured in the Soviet Union has been used repeatedly against anti-communist soldiers and civilians in Laos. Now the State Department says it has solid evidence that this is so. Perhaps the folks at State read Sterling Seagrave's new book.

With chilling and convincing detail, Mr. Seagrave documents what observers in Southeast Asia have long suspected: Reports by hill-tribe refugees of a deadly "yellow rain" that falls from planes and

stunned when Hmong survivors described what happened after the yellow droplets, accompanied by billowy clouds of red, blue, green or pink gas, rolled over their mountain villages. As one tribesman recalled:

"Most of the people were already dead. There was blood coming from their noses and ears, and blisters appeared on their skin. Their skin was turning yellow. All the chickens, dogs and pigs were also dead. The people who were not dead were jerking like fish when you take them out of the water.... Blood came from their noses and they died."

The Hmong called it "medicine from the sky."

The combination of symptoms, especially the massive external hemorrhaging, fit no known nerve agent. So Mr. Seagrave set out on a sort of chemical-warfare odyssey, buttonholing experts around the world and visiting sites where gas had been used (Belgium in World War I, and Yemen during its civil war in the 1960s), or where it is likely being used now (Afghanistan).

Soon the reader's head is ringing with the contents of a deadly pharmacopeia: mustard and phosgene, Agent Orange and a gas "that smells like geraniums," Blue-X and T2, moldy bread and Hawaiian seaweed.

A troublesome Ukrainian emigre gets a fatal whiff of poison mist from a KGB agent in a Munich stairwell. A Bulgarian defector, whose BBC broadcasts were stirring up trouble at home, is fatally pricked by a James Bond-style umbrella while walking near the Thames.

What does it all mean? Says the author: "What we have been witnessing has been the wholesale field-testing of an impressive variety of Soviet war agents and poisons on human beings, from the Middle East to the Far East, over a period of roughly 15 years." A long-running chemical-biological Guernica.

Mr. Seagrave says this emphasis guarantees that war in Europe would include chemical and biological agents as surely as bazookas. He finds traditionally neutral Sweden and Switzerland best equipped to defend their populations. But at the present state of readiness, the average NATO soldier will still be fumbling with his gas mask when the poison cloud hits.

The U.S. doesn't escape criticism. Mr. Seagrave points to the massive use of chemical defoliants in Vietnam, and a half-baked plan to spray LSD on the Viet Cong. Then there was the 1968 announcement by President Nixon when he said the U.S. was banning biological weapons "forever" and limiting chemical research to defensive weapons. Development went on nonetheless, sometimes under the guise of "cancer research," and the public and press were lulled into a false security. A record of "unrelenting folly combined with fraud," Mr. Seagrave says.

And what of the mysterious poison in Laos? It is, the author says, a biological toxin derived from a type of fungus that attacks moldy grain in the Soviet countryside and, periodically, Soviet peasants. The derived toxin is called T2. It can be stored at room temperature for years and is absorbable through a victim's skin. A drop is fatal.

Mr. Seagrave says 22 non-classified articles published in Soviet scientific literature deal with how best to synthesize T2. "Western scientists are unable to come up with any benign reason why Moscow would want to produce such vast quantities of a poison that has no apparent use whatever except to cause people to drown in their own blood." The non-benign reasons are obvious.

Mr. Carlson, Regions columnist for the Journal, formerly covered Thailand for the Asian Wall Street Journal.

The Bookshelf

"Yellow Rain: A Journey Through the Terror of Chemical Warfare"
By Sterling Seagrave

kills with excruciating swiftness aren't simply fabrications of a collective primitive imagination. The stories are painfully true.

"Yellow Rain: A Journey Through the Terror of Chemical Warfare" (M. Evans & Co., 304 pages, \$11.95) is the right book at the right time. It has its flaws: the anecdotes that open each chapter are often labored; the author flounders when he argues for the limited buildup of a type of weaponry he abhors.

But this grotesque story requires a fact-finder above all; and in this capacity Mr. Seagrave is first rate. Start with the plight of the Hmong. These tough, Laotian hill tribesmen have paid a stiff price for supporting the U.S. during the Vietnam war. Beginning in mid-1976, Hmong villages have been doused with airborne agents of unheard-of toxicity.

Mr. Seagrave had a natural interest in the story. He grew up in Southeast Asia, the son of the legendary "Burma surgeon," Dr. Gordon Seagrave. Like others, he was